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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000598

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/E AND USAID FOR GEORGIANNA PLATT
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SUBJECT: NGO SURVIVAL IN ERITREA

REF: ASMARA 429

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PolOff met with three of the more prominent NGOs left in Eritrea to discuss operational hardships. The NGOs (Lutheran World Federation, LWF; Catholic Relief Services, CRS; and Oxfam) each described a tightening of restrictive measures making it next to impossible to operate. The NGO representatives mentioned old difficulties such as imprisoned staff and lack of fuel and also new challenges such as having vehicles confiscated and staff members fleeing to Sudan. End Summary.

FUEL IS NOT AN OPTION

¶2. (C) No NGO has received fuel (diesel) rations since November 2007. Instead, the zoba (regional) administrators allocate fuel on a project by project basis. For instance, Oxfam may be given exactly enough fuel by the Northern Red Sea zoba to travel round trip from Asmara to the project site in the region. This leaves little room for project flexibility. The NGOs implement a variety of measures to circumvent the restrictions, including renting cars and drivers to travel to project sites (causing overall operating costs to skyrocket) and also using gasoline cars around the city. The GSE restrictions also leave zero fuel for generators. LWF has approximately 60-80 liters of fuel remaining in its generator, which consumes 20 liters of fuel if left to run an entire business day. The NGOs are able to add a liter here and there by obtaining fuel from zoba administrators for project site visits and then cancelling the visit once the fuel is obtained. The same tactic is used when ordering diesel for Asmara-based trips. The fuel is added to the generators and the NGOs simply use gasoline cars instead.

EMPLOYEES ROUNDED-UP OR FLEEING

¶3. (C) There are still an unknown number of NGO employees imprisoned from the August 21 round-up (reftel). Authorities initially arrested 10 Oxfam employees; four have been released thus far. One LWF employee was released last week; another remains in prison. According to LWF director, Jan Schutte (protect), the released employee had all her national service paperwork in order. She was released simply because authorities had finally gotten to reviewing her papers. Mr. Schutte also stated that all remaining detainees continue to be held in the Adi Abeyto prison, which reportedly has 600

prisoners (120 women, 480 men).

¶4. (C) The confusion over national service requirements stems from conflicting statements between the Ministry of Labor and the National Service proclamation. According to the MOL, employment in an NGO can count towards national service requirements. The National Service proclamation, however, states that in a time of emergency Eritreans may be called upon to complete national service in any capacity at any given moment. This clause is thought to be the driving force behind the periodic NGO round-ups.

¶5. (C) The NGOs have also seen a surge of runaway employees as of late. Oxfam director, Aymam Omer (protect), reported four employees escaped to Sudan and other locations over the past few months, not counting the six who disappeared to avoid the August 21 round-up. LWF and CRS report similar circumstances as well.

CARS CONFISCATED

¶6. (C) The newest difficulty to hit the NGOs is the random confiscation of cars marked with the "ER-4" license plate, designated for NGOs and religious organizations. Thus far, at least eight vehicles have been confiscated from the churches, at least one from ICRC, and a handful from several local NGOs. The NGO directors collectively speculate the GSE is seeking to clamp down on black-market diesel purchases as well as to keep closer tabs on which organization is driving which car.

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UNDER CONSTANT THREAT

¶7. (C) Without having to say so, each organization made it clear they are under constant surveillance. The CRS director quickly changed the subject to talk of the holiday season once it became clear nearby Eritreans were listening. Mr. Omer of Oxfam constantly glanced towards the open door of his office, making sure local staff were never in earshot. Mr. Schutte spoke in a hushed tone within his office throughout the conversation. Even details of normal operations, such as in which zoba a project is located or the number of beneficiaries, draws undue attention and puts the local staff at risk. Mr. Omer stated his finance supervisor refused to sign the final check for an employee who fled the country, citing it would immediately bring negative attention on herself. Senior staff meetings were useless, he continued. Each employee is scared to death that the other is reporting to the GSE.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The remaining international NGOs are determined to exist, but can only take so much. Project implementation is already exceedingly difficult and will only become more so as employees continue to flee and the GSE comes up with new ways to harass the NGOs. The Oxfam director phrased the situation best by stating "yes we have decided to be here, but we keep the door open." End Comment.

MCMULLEN